

LORI A. BARON

The Shema in John's Gospel

*Wissenschaftliche Untersuchungen
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Lori Baron

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Chapter 1

Introduction

The Shema is the centerpiece of Jewish prayer, a call to listen to and obey God alone, a summons to loyalty and service that demands the fullest response of the whole person. Abraham Joshua Heschel has written:

Nothing in Jewish life is more hallowed than the saying of the Shema: “Hear, O Israel, the Lord is our God, the Lord is One.” All over the world “the people acclaim His Oneness evening and morning, twice every day, and with tender affection recite the Shema”... The voice that calls: “Hear, He is One,” is recalled, revived. It is the climax of devotion at the close of the Day of Atonement. It is the last word to come from the lips of the dying Jew and from the lips of those who are present at that moment.¹

The proclamation of the divine unity along with the injunction to love God with all one’s heart, soul, and strength (Deut 6:4–5), captures the essence of what it means to be Jewish, to be called into a unique covenant with the one God, and as one people, to take seriously the responsibilities of that relationship.

Although the biblical context does not deny the existence of other gods, but rather affirms Israel’s loyalty to her God alone, in subsequent tradition the Shema would be construed in new ways: as the watchword of monotheism, as a call to martyrdom, and as “the acceptance of the yoke of the Kingdom of Heaven”: the recognition of God’s kingship.² Throughout its history, the Shema has evolved and taken on new meanings as Jews have found themselves in new political and social settings, living among different nations and their gods. In the face of the challenges posed by these settings, the Shema did not only take on new theological nuances, but also acquired polemical and social functions.³ The Shema was used to define and sharpen Jewish identities in social settings that challenged God’s oneness and the uniqueness of Israel’s relationship with God. One such threat, certainly the most enduring one, came from Christianity.

The Shema is a significant text not only in the Hebrew Bible and Second Temple literature, but also in the New Testament. Matthew, Mark, and Luke cite the Shema as the epitome of Jesus’s teaching, the Great Commandment,

¹ Abraham Joshua Heschel, *Between God and Man: An Interpretation of Judaism* (New York: The Free Press, 1959), 104.

² E.g., m. Ber. 2:2, 5.

³ Jacob Mann, “Changes in the Divine Service of the Synagogue Due to Religious Persecutions,” *HUCA* 4 (1927): 245–261. All abbreviations follow *The SBL Handbook of Style* (2nd ed.; Atlanta: SBL Press, 2014).

and Paul and other writers also allude to it.⁴ The absence of the Great Commandment in John is not surprising, as the Fourth Gospel tends to go its own way in its distinctive narrative of Jesus's life, ministry, death, and resurrection. And yet, the present study will argue that the Shema is more central to the Christology and historical setting of John's Gospel than to any other New Testament writing, that John makes *more* of the Shema than do the Synoptic authors who cite it.

In a 1947 study, C. K. Barrett makes the intriguing suggestion that John takes the theme of God's oneness, along with the command to love God and neighbor, and develops them into the movement at the very heart of the Fourth Gospel, weaving these themes throughout his narrative.⁵ Joel Marcus takes note of Barrett's article and observes that in both Mark and John, tensions between Jesus and Jewish authorities seem to reflect late first-century conflicts in which Christians are accused of blasphemy for their claims about Jesus.⁶ The present study builds upon the observations of both Marcus and Barrett in an effort to demonstrate that (1) themes of the Shema are presented in a novel way in John's Gospel, and (2) these Johannine innovations have resulted from a bitter conflict between believers in Jesus and non-Christian Jews in the late first century, a conflict over Jesus's identity that is expressed through a novel interpretation of one of the most sacred Jewish texts. John's use of the Shema provides a lens through which the reader is able to witness part of the painful process of self-definition and separation of two groups: the Johannine community and the larger community of Jews to which its members once belonged.

This study identifies prominent themes found in the Shema (Deut 6:4–9) and tracks them in John's Gospel. Prior to studying John, Chapter 2 discusses the Shema in its Deuteronomic context and identifies its key motifs of hearing, oneness, love for God, and life. It also follows these themes throughout Deuteronomy and identifies secondary motifs that often accompany them, e.g., keeping the commandments, blessings and curses, and witness to the nations. These themes frequently cluster together as features of the Deuteronomic covenant.

Chapter 3 lays out a methodology by which allusions to the Shema are identified and observes where these allusions crop up in the Hebrew Bible outside of Deuteronomy. Because the Shema is at the heart of the covenant, allusions to it tend to be found in passages that depict a new or renewed covenant, and in descriptions of faithful leaders who keep the commandments and encourage Israel to keep them diligently. In Wisdom literature, both canonical and non-

⁴ Matt 22:34–40; Mark 12:28–34; Luke 10:25–37.

⁵ C. K. Barrett, "The Old Testament in the Fourth Gospel," *JTS* 48 (1947): 155–169.

⁶ Joel Marcus, "Authority to Forgive Sins upon the Earth: The *Shema* in the Gospel of Mark," in *The Gospels and the Scriptures of Israel* (LNTS 104; ed. Craig A. Evans and William Richard Stegner; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1994), 199; cf. Marcus, "Idolatry in the New Testament," *Int* 60 (2006): 152–164.

canonical, the sages draw upon the Shema to show that wisdom is found in loving God and keeping God's commandments. The Shema also plays a key role in prophetic oracles of eschatological restoration, where the one God promises to re-gather Israel in the land and create one, unified people.

Chapter 4 explores the use of the Shema in Second Temple literature. Along with the Hebrew prophets, some writers blame the exile on Israel's disobedience and call for a return to the covenant using the language and motifs of the Shema. Some describe the ritual practices of placing words of the law upon their hands and foreheads and upon their doorposts and gates in accordance with Deut 6:6–9. The sectarian writings at Qumran describe an exclusive covenant with God in terms of the Shema and use its language to depict personal piety. Other writers, in conversation with the Greco-Roman culture of diaspora Jewish communities, use the Shema to bridge the gap between Jewish thought and Greek philosophy.

The Shema in the New Testament is the topic of Chapter 5. The Synoptic gospels each contain a version of the Great Commandment, along with other echoes of the Shema. Paul reworks the Shema with a remarkable Christological twist in 1 Cor 8:4–6. His case for the unity of Jew and gentile in Christ, apart from the law, has the Shema as its cornerstone. Like the oracles of restoration in the Hebrew Bible, Paul draws upon an eschatological interpretation of the Shema to demonstrate that the unity of God and Christ must result in a unity among believers.

In Chapter 6, the themes of the Shema are traced in John's Gospel, in scenes that involve conflict between Jesus and Jewish authorities, where Jesus is charged with making himself equal to God (John 5, 8, and 10). Jesus argues for his unity with the Father in terms of the Shema. Intertextual echoes of prophecies of eschatological restoration demonstrate that for John, Jesus is the messianic ruler of the new age and his disciples are the unified people of God. John's rhetoric is considered in relation to the social trauma caused by a rift between Jews who believed that Jesus was the Messiah and those who did not.

Chapter 7 outlines John's use of the Shema in the Farewell Discourse. In this material, Jesus is portrayed in the same terms as YHWH in Deuteronomy: Jesus chooses a people, loves them, gives commandments, and is the source of life. Resonances with prophecies of eschatological restoration are strong in John 17, where the author emphasizes unity between Father, Son, and disciples as a witness to the world. Finally, the new commandment of John 13:34 is discussed as a reinterpretation of the Shema and the law of Moses for the eschatological age.

Chapter 8 examines the Johannine crucifixion scene and the Prologue in light of the Shema. Because the reading proposed here involves a rhetorical strategy that is highly inflammatory and potentially dangerous in terms of its treatment of "the Jews," it will be necessary to broach the topic of anti-Judaism

in John. Various solutions to John's anti-Jewish passages are surveyed, including the social and historical context, rhetorical features of ancient polemic, and the use of prophetic critique in intra-Jewish conflict. Ultimately, the text's high Christology leads to a theological anti-Judaism that denies the validity of Judaism apart from Christ. The goal in this section is to uphold the integrity of the text while also advocating that John's contentious rhetoric be understood as descriptive of and limited to a particular historical and cultural setting.

Chapter 2

The Shema in Deuteronomy

2.1 Introduction

The primary focus of this chapter is determining the meaning of the Shema and how it functions within the book of Deuteronomy, with particular attention paid to elements shared by both Deuteronomy and the Fourth Gospel. The broad context of Deut 6:4–9 has two exegetically significant points of contact with John’s Gospel. First, the text is composed of older material that is reworked by an editor (or editors) to present the material as a witness for a new generation. The core of Deuteronomy is generally dated to the seventh century BCE for a variety of reasons, including: (1) its emphasis on the centralization of the cult and the discovery of a book of law in the temple during the reign of Josiah (622 BCE); (2) rhetoric and style; and (3) affinities with the VTE (Vassal Treaties of Esarhaddon) in which a sovereign imposes a loyalty oath on his vassal.¹ For these reasons, Moshe Weinfeld writes: “Although the book of Deuteronomy is addressed to the generation entering the land of Canaan, the actual audience of the book belongs to the Josianic period.”² This situation bears remarkable similarities with J. Louis Martyn’s well-known description of the Gospel of John as a two-level drama, or, more accurately for our purposes, a two-level reading

¹ Moshe Weinfeld, *Deuteronomy 1–11: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary* (AB 5; New York: Doubleday, 1991), 1–84; Weinfeld, *Deuteronomy and the Deuteronomistic School* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1972), 1–9; Weinfeld, “Traces of Assyrian Treaty Formulae in Deuteronomy,” *Bib* 46 (1965): 417–427 passim; cf. Eckart Otto: “In Anknüpfung an Ex 22,19a wird das Hauptgesetz der Kultreinheit (Dtn 13*) als Entfaltung des Alleinverehrungsanspruchs JHWHs in Analogie zum neuassyrischen Loyalitätseid gegenüber dem Großkönig gestaltet. Dem korrespondieren die ebenfalls unter dem Einfluss der neuassyrischen Loyalitätseide dtn gestalteten Flüche (Dtn 28,23–43*) ... Der dtn Redaktor interpretiert also das Reformwerk der Auslegung des BB in Dtn 12–26* als Loyalitätseid gegenüber JHWH,” in *Theologische Ethik des Alten Testaments* (TW 3; Stuttgart: Kohlhammer, 1994), 180; R. Frankena, “The Vassal-Treaties of Esarhaddon and the Dating of Deuteronomy,” in *Oudtestamentische Studiën. XIV* (ed. Pieter A. H. de Boer; Leiden: Brill, 1965), 122–154; Jeffrey H. Tigay, *Deuteronomy: The Traditional Hebrew Text with the New JPS Translation* (The NJPS Torah Commentary; Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society, 1996), xix–xxvi; Herman L. Horowitz, “The *Sh'ma* Reconsidered,” *Judaism* 24 (1975): 476–481.

² Weinfeld, *Deuteronomy 1–11*, 239; cf. Weinfeld, *Deuteronomistic School*, 158–178.

strategy. According to Martyn, the Fourth Evangelist reworks older material so that his Gospel might speak to a new audience facing its own, unique set of circumstances in the late first century.³ Both Deuteronomy and the Fourth Gospel address people whose identity is in transition, in order to articulate what is enduring in their experience and vital to their continuing existence. Both writings confront their contemporary audiences, along with future generations, with the question of whether or not they will participate as part of the people of God. Both writings maintain that heeding the message contained within is a matter of life and death.

A second way in which the broader context of Deuteronomy is analogous to the Gospel of John is in its use of the literary convention of the farewell speech. The bulk of Deuteronomy consists of Moses's farewell address to Israel as the nation prepares to enter the land just before Moses's death. In the Gospel of John, chapters 13–17 depict Jesus's farewell address to his disciples prior to his return to his heavenly Father. This formal similarity suggests that the reader might expect to find some formal and conceptual affinities between the two works. Additionally, the significance of the figure of Moses throughout the Fourth Gospel heightens the potential significance of the Shema in John.⁴

A quick comparison of the vocabulary of Deut 6:4–5 LXX with portions of the Fourth Gospel yields the results in the table on the following page. This is not an exhaustive list of verbal correspondences between Deut 6:4–9 and the Fourth Gospel, but it is introduced at this point to highlight key words and concepts common to both texts: hearing, oneness, and love for God; later, a fourth theme, life, will be added. Chapters 6 and 7 will take up these themes of the Shema in an exegetical analysis of John's Gospel.

³ One could argue that this two-level reading strategy applies to all the canonical Gospels, all of which include traces of material that post-dates the destruction of the temple. Critiques of Martyn's work can be found in Chapter 6 (152–154). Furthermore, I will demonstrate in Chapter 4 that several Second Temple writers employ this same strategy.

⁴ On Moses traditions in the Fourth Gospel, see Wayne A. Meeks, *The Prophet-King: Moses Traditions and the Johannine Christology* (NovTSup 14; Leiden: Brill, 1967); cf. T. Francis Glasson, *Moses in the Fourth Gospel* (London: SCM Press, 1963); M. E. Boismard, *Moses or Jesus: An Essay in Johannine Christology* (trans. Benedict T. Viviano; Leuven: Leuven University Press, 1993).

Table 1. Some Vocabulary of the Shema in John's Gospel

Deut 6:4–5 LXX	Gospel of John
ἄκουε Ἰσραηλ κύριος ὁ θεὸς ἡμῶν κύριος εἷς ἐστίν (Deut 6:4).	Ἄμην ἀμὴν λέγω ὑμῖν ὅτι ὁ τὸν λόγον μου ἀκούων καὶ πιστεύων τῷ πέμψαντί με ἔχει ζωὴν αἰώνιον καὶ εἰς κρίσιν οὐκ ἔρχεται, ἀλλὰ μεταβέβηκεν ἐκ τοῦ θανάτου εἰς τὴν ζωὴν (John 5:24; cf. 5:25, 28, 37; 6:45; 7:40; 8:43; 8:47; 10:3, 8, 16; 14:24; 18:37). ἐγὼ καὶ ὁ πατὴρ ἐν ἑσμεν (John 10:30; cf. 17:11, 21, 22).
καὶ ἀγαπήσεις κύριον τὸν θεόν σου ἐξ ὅλης τῆς καρδίας σου καὶ ἐξ ὅλης τῆς ψυχῆς σου καὶ ἐξ ὅλης τῆς δυνάμεώς σου (Deut 6:5).	ἀλλὰ ἐγνώκα ὑμᾶς ὅτι τὴν ἀγάπην τοῦ θεοῦ οὐκ ἔχετε ἐν ἑαυτοῖς (John 5:42). Ἐὰν ἀγαπᾷτέ με , τὰς ἐντολὰς τὰς ἐμὰς τηρήσετε (cf. John 14:21, 24; 15:10).

2.2 Moses's First Speech (Deut 1–4:43)

Deuteronomy is framed as a series of three speeches which comprise Moses's farewell address (Deut 1:3–4:40; 4:44–28:68; 28:69; 30:20).⁵ In the first speech, Moses recounts the events of the wilderness wanderings leading up to the entrance into and occupation of the land. Four important themes emerge in this oration: (1) hearing or obedience; (2) the uniqueness of YHWH,⁶ (3) love; and (4) life. All four themes are connected to the injunction to keep the commandments. These key themes, laid out in the first speech, resurface in the second and third speeches and are woven throughout Deuteronomy. These motifs form a kind of covenantal cluster that represents the ideal relationship between God and Israel. These themes will converge with particular clarity and force in the Shema.

The first speech begins with a summary of the events that took place between Horeb and the plains of Moab; the historical experience of the Israelites is the basis for their obligation to serve YHWH (e.g., 4:1, 20, 37–40). This account corresponds to the historical prologue of VTE treaties, which recount the past benefactions of a king to his subjects, often including deliverance from

⁵ Different commentators divide the speeches somewhat differently. The division cited above makes the best sense of the literary transitions in the text; also Alexander Rofé, "The Book of Deuteronomy: A Summary," in *Deuteronomy: Issues and Interpretation* (London: T&T Clark, 2002), 1.

⁶ The spelling YHWH will be used to represent the Tetragrammaton, usually translated "LORD" in English, to distinguish the name of Israel's God from the more general terms "gods" or "God," אלהים in Hebrew.

enemies. These acts obligated the vassals to the suzerain. Since the discovery of the VTE, there has been a scholarly consensus that the Deuteronomic covenant is patterned on ancient loyalty oaths of vassals to their suzerains.⁷ These treaties, which spanned two millennia and multiple cultures, contain numerous similarities to the Deuteronomic covenant, such as the command for exclusive loyalty to the suzerain, the command to love the suzerain, the requirement to keep the treaty stipulations and to teach them to one's children, the invocation of heaven and earth as witnesses, and the blessings and curses for compliance and noncompliance with the terms of the treaty. In Moses's first speech, the deliverance from Egypt serves as a historical prologue, binding the people into the exclusive service of YHWH.

2.3 Hearing or obedience

Deuteronomy 4 begins with Moses exhorting the people to hear YHWH's teaching: "And now, *Israel*, hear the statutes and ordinances that I am teaching you to do in order that you might live; and go in and possess the land that YHWH, the God of your ancestors is giving to you" (Deut 4:1; translation mine; emphasis added; cf. 4:10, 12, 30, 33, 36).⁸ Although the words appear here in reverse order from Deut 6:4, the imperative *שמע* anticipates the solemn call of 6:4. The command confronts the people with divine revelation, with an obligation to hear and obey YHWH's voice, which is concretized in Israel's life in the statutes and ordinances of the covenant.

2.4 The Uniqueness of YHWH

YHWH alone rescued the nation from Egypt with signs and wonders and gave them his statutes and ordinances (4:32–40). These unique events point to a unique God: "To you it was shown so that you would acknowledge that YHWH is God; there is no other besides him" (4:35). The text underscores this point: "there is no other" (4:39), emphasizing YHWH's singular role in Israel's life. Weinfeld maintains that the exclusivity of Deut 4:35 and 39 "corresponds ideologically to the Shema proclamation in Deut 6:4."⁹

⁷ Weinfeld, *Deuteronomy 1–11*, 6–9 and passim; Weinfeld, "The Loyalty Oath in the Ancient Near East," *Ugarit-Forschungen* 8 (1976): 379–414; Tigay, *Deuteronomy*, xiv–xv.

⁸ All citations of the Hebrew Bible, Deutero-canonical literature, and the NT are taken from the NRSV except where noted. For the implicit link between hearing and obeying, see BDB, s.v. "שמע."

⁹ Weinfeld, *Deuteronomy 1–11*, 229.

If YHWH was to be Israel's only God, then it followed that Israel would be YHWH's unique people. Israel was to be a singular people, bound to YHWH by YHWH's nearness (4:7) and by the privilege of being the sole recipients of YHWH's just teaching, the Torah (4:8). YHWH's uniqueness was inextricably linked to Israel's uniqueness as YHWH's people; the idea that the divine unity creates a unity among God's people is central to prophetic oracles of restoration and is taken up in John's Gospel as well. In Deuteronomy, in order to maintain the covenantal relationship, the people are required to hear and obey YHWH's commandments (4:5–8).

The consequence of idol worship will be exile (4:25–28; cf. 30:17–18), which will endanger Israel's existence as a people. This section ends with the message that YHWH will take the people back if they return to him (4:29–31). The two-level reading strategy of Deuteronomy is thinly disguised here; an audience that has already experienced exile is reminded of the hope of restoration if they "hear" and return to YHWH.¹⁰

2.5 Love

YHWH's love for Israel and Israel's ancestors is put forth as the basis for Israel's election: "And because he loved your ancestors, he chose their descendants after them. He brought you out of Egypt with his own presence, by his great power" (Deut 4:37; cf. 5:10; 7:7–8; 10:15; 23:5). As mentioned earlier, the recollection of benefits bestowed on the people recalls the historical prologue section of Hittite treaties, which recount the benevolent acts the suzerain has performed on behalf of his vassal. Deut 4:37 serves to ground the command to love YHWH (6:5) in YHWH's prior love for Israel: the deliverance from Egypt, along with the giving of the law, is put forth as evidence of this love.¹¹

In Ancient Near Eastern (ANE) suzerainty treaties, the benefits of an overlord come with a price: a series of stipulations which govern the lives of the vassals. The promise of protection and other benefits is accompanied by threats of destruction should the vassal disobey the covenant stipulations. In Deuteronomy, YHWH's stipulations come with curses for disobedience, although the threat is mitigated should Israel have a change of heart and return to YHWH: "From there you will seek YHWH your God, and you will find him if you search for him *with all your heart and soul*" (Deut 4:29; emphasis added). Just as the command to hear in Deut 4:1 anticipates Deut 6:4, so also the phrase "with all your heart and soul" attunes the hearer to the commitment of an Israelite's whole self to YHWH in 6:5.

¹⁰ Weinfeld, *Deuteronomy 1–11*, 216.

¹¹ Weinfeld, *Deuteronomistic School*, 69–74.

2.6 Life

Hearing and obeying the commandments leads to life: “And now, Israel, *hear* the statutes and ordinances that I am teaching you to do *in order that you might live*” (4:1 emphasis added; cf. 4:4; 6:24; 8:1). On the other hand, neglecting the covenant, whether by worshiping idols or disregarding the commandments, brings death and destruction: “For YHWH your God is a devouring fire, a jealous God” (4:26; cf. 4:3, 24). The choice of life or death is presented in stark terms; life is closely connected with keeping the commandments, while idolatry is linked to death. This theme completes the pattern of hearing/oneness/love/life evinced in Deuteronomy.

2.7 Moses’s Second Speech (Deut 4:44–28:68)

Moses’s second speech repeats and amplifies the themes introduced in the first. These motifs are especially concentrated in the Decalogue (Deut 5:1–21) and in the Shema (Deut 6:4–9; cf. 11:13–21). The close relationship between the Decalogue (Deut 5:1–21) and the Shema has been widely recognized.¹² The two passages occur in close proximity to one another within Deuteronomy and both came to function as Israelite creeds containing a declaration of the unity of God. According to the Mishnah, the Decalogue and the Shema were read together daily in the temple (m. Tamid 5:1; cf. b. Ber. 12a).¹³ The Nash Papyrus, dating to the first or second century BCE, contains a Hebrew text of the Decalogue followed by the first verse of the Shema.¹⁴ The fact that these two

¹² Weinfeld, *Deuteronomy 1–11*, 340; cf. Eckart Otto, *Deuteronomium 1–11: Zweiter Teilband: 4,44–11,32* (HThKAT; Freiburg: Herder, 2012), 790–829; Dale C. Allison, Jr., *Resurrecting Jesus: The Earliest Christian Tradition and its Interpreters* (New York: T&T Clark, 2005), 153–155; Reuven Kimelman, “The Shema Liturgy: From Covenant Ceremony to Coronation,” in *Kenishta: Studies of the Synagogue World* (ed. Joseph Tabory; Ramat-Gan, Israel: Bar-Ilan University Press, 2001), 9–105 (68–69); Stefan C. Reif, *Problems with Prayers: Studies in the Textual History of Early Rabbinic Liturgy* (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2006), 112–114.

¹³ Paul Foster has recently argued that this statement is a retrojection of later practice into a Second Temple setting in “Why Did Matthew Get the Shema Wrong? A Study of Matthew 22:37,” *JBL* 122 (2003): 309–333 (326). Some of the prayers mentioned in the Mishnah, however, do not belong to the later rabbinic period, i.e., the Decalogue and the benediction on the outgoing course of priests. See also Kimelman, 13, n. 13; Joel Marcus, *Mark 8–16: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary* (AB 27A; New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009), 837; Reif, *Problems with Prayers*, 118, n. 30.

¹⁴ On the history, dating, and text of the Nash Papyrus, see Reif, *Problems with Prayers*, 115–116; cf. W.F. Albright, “A Biblical Fragment from the Maccabean Age: The Nash Papyrus,” *JBL* 56 (1937): 145–176; Marvin A. Sweeney, “The Nash Papyrus: Preview of Coming Attractions,” *BAR* 36 (2010): 43–48, 77.

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